

How Democrats Should Talk About Iraq

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My first trip to a combat zone occurred in 1969. I was a 21-year-old staff sergeant, naive as hell, a freshly trained Army Ranger who had left Princeton University to volunteer for ground combat in Vietnam. I vividly recall feeling way out of step with my Ivy League colleagues.

Well, that same out-of-step feeling is back. But this time it's about Iraq and involves some of my professional colleagues, political leaders and activists who are carelessly using words and phrases such as "quagmire," "our failure in Iraq," "this is just another Vietnam," or "the Bush administration has no plan."

I went to Iraq a couple of weeks ago to resolve for myself the recent contrast between gloomy news coverage and optimistic Pentagon reports of our progress. My trip left no doubt that the Pentagon's version is far closer to reality. Our news coverage disproportionately dwells on the deaths, mistakes and setbacks suffered by coalition forces. Some will attribute this to a grand left-wing conspiracy, but a more plausible explanation is simply the tendency of our news media to focus on bad news. It sells. Few Americans think local news coverage fairly captures the essence of daily life and progress in their hometowns. Coverage from Iraq is no different.

Falsely bleak Iraq news circulating in the United States is a serious problem for coalition forces because it discourages Iraqi cooperation, the key to our ultimate success or failure, a daily determinant of life or death for American soldiers. As one example, coalition forces are now discovering nearly 50 percent of the improvised explosive devices through tips. Guess how they discover the rest.

We not only need Iraqi tips and intelligence, we need Iraqis fighting by our side and

eventually assuming full responsibility for their internal security. But Iraqis have not forgotten the 1991 Gulf War. America encouraged the Shiites to rebel, then abandoned them to be slaughtered. I visited one of the mass graves, mute testimony to the wisdom of being cautious about relying on American politicians to live up to their commitments.

For Iraqis, news of America's resolve is critical to any decision to cooperate with coalition forces, a decision that can lead to death. Newspaper start-up ventures and sales of satellite dishes absolutely exploded following the collapse of Saddam Hussein's regime. With this on top of the Internet, Iraqis do get the picture from America -- literally.

Many in Washington view the contest for the presidency and control of Congress as a zero-sum game without external costs or benefits. Politicians and activists in each party reflexively celebrate, spread and embellish news that is bad for the opposition. But to do that now with regard to Iraq harms our troops and our effort. Concerning Iraq, this normal political tripe can impose a heavy external cost.

It is too soon to determine whether Iraqis will step forward to secure their own freedom. For now, responsible Democrats should carefully avoid using the language of failure. It is false. It endangers our troops and our effort. It can be unforgivably self-fulfilling.

Democratic candidates for the presidency should repeatedly hammer home their support, if elected, for helping the Iraqi people secure their own freedom. It is fine for each to contend that he or she is a better choice for securing victory in Iraq. But in making this argument, care should be taken not to dwell on perceived failures of the current team or plan. Americans, with help from commentators and others, will decide this for themselves.

Instead of being negative about Iraq, Democratic presidential candidates should emphasize the positive aspects of their own plans for Iraq. Save the negative attacks for the issues of jobs and the economy. Iraqis are far less likely to support the coalition effort if they think America might withdraw following the 2004 election.

Finally, no better signal of our commitment to this effort could currently be provided than

for Congress to quickly approve, with little dissent or dithering, the president's request for an additional \$87 billion for Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course no one wants to spend such a sum. But it is well worth it if it leads to a stable, secular representative government in Iraq, something that could immeasurably improve our future national security.

The writer is a Democratic representative from Georgia.

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